

A Reflection on and Proposal for Current Social Support for Chinese Migrant Workers in the UK*

Lan LO¹, Yu-Wen CHEN²

¹University of Nottingham, UK, ²Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan

Abstract:

This paper reflects upon the old and new challenges facing Chinese migrant workers in the United Kingdom. The vulnerability of Chinese migrant workers is related not only to the lack of external social support from the British state and society but also to the intrinsic diversity and complexity of Chinese migrant communities. Newly arrived Chinese migrant workers from Fujian, Dongbei, and other region face different conditions and needs than the more settled Cantonese migrants and other overseas Chinese communities. Additionally, we found a multi-agency communication gap among governmental, non-governmental, and ethnic community organizations that leaves Chinese migrant workers socially vulnerable. Consequently, the ethnic community commits some abuse of social support, while local service providers (local government, non-governmental organizations, and ethnic community groups) lack a coping strategy for Chinese migrants' changing needs, demands, and support shortfalls. A multi-participation network activating ethnic community organizations' roles is proposed as an appropriate means to bridge the communication gap and increase migrant workers' integration.

Key Words: Chinese Migrant Workers, Social Support, Ethnic Community Organization, Multi-Participation Network

* Lan Lo, School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, University of Nottingham, UK; Email: lan.lo@nottingham.ac.uk. Yu-Wen Chen, Associate Professor, Graduate School of Public Policy, Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan; Email: yuwenjuliechen@yahoo.com. Special thanks to two projects: "Employment conditions of Chinese migrant workers in the East Midlands" (2009) and "Practicing global citizenship in Chinese community" (2012) designed and led by Dr. Bin Wu (University of Nottingham) which has made the writing of this paper possible.

1. INTRODUCTION

The accelerating pace of economic globalization increases the international flow of products, services, and capital, resulting in the rise of labor migration across countries. At least half of migrants are classified as manual migrant workers.¹ The integration of migrant workers thus has become a significant issue facing welfare states such as the United Kingdom (UK).

In the UK, the large Fuqing group of Chinese migrants recently has attracted local media attention because of the Dover (2000) and Morecambe Bay (2004) tragedies, which exposed the vulnerability of Chinese migrant workers. The Dover tragedy refers to the incident in which 58 Chinese asylum-seekers and refugees were found dead in the back of a lorry in Dover. In the Morecambe Bay incident, 23 Chinese cockle pickers were drawn by an incoming tide.²

These incidents highlighted that Chinese migrant workers are under-researched because they are seen traditionally as a closed, self-sufficient group,³ even though the massive growth of the Chinese community has transformed it from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous group.⁴ Although Chinese migrant workers have contributed to the economic development of both their host and the home society, research on their vulnerability and barriers to integrating into British society is limited. Much of the research on migrant labor in the UK performed in the past 10 years focused on eastern European migrants (those from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia). Earlier studies revealed unmet cultural expectations, language barriers, a lack of community support, and social isolation among Chinese migrants, but did not discern the conditions that different waves of Chinese migrants face in the UK.⁵ It has been speculated that, to better integrate Chinese migrants, adequate funding is needed. This measure, however, might not be the only solution to improve the conditions of vulnerable migrant workers. To ameliorate the current practices and policies for supporting Chinese migrants, this paper aims to highlight new challenges arising from the changing demographics of Chinese migrant workers in the UK and argues that a multi-

¹ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report: The Future of Migration* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2010).

² The Guardian, Chronicle of the Dover tragedy; The Guardian, Victims of the sands and the snakeheads.

³ C. K. Chan, C. Bankole, and B. Graham, *Beyond silent organizations: A reflection of the UK Chinese people and their community organizations*.

⁴ Home Office, *Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom 2004* (Norwich: HMSO, 2005); W. Somerville and M. Sumption, *Immigration and the Labor Market: Theory, Evidence and Policy* (London: Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2009).

⁵ Y. Cheng, "The Chinese: Upwardly Mobile," in *Ethnicity in the 1991 Census*, Ed. C. Peach (London: HMSO, 1996), 161-180; R. C. M. Chau and S. W. K. Yu, *Social exclusion of Chinese people in Britain*; W. K. Yu, *Chinese Older People: A Need for Social Inclusion in Two Communities* (Bristol: The Policy Press and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000).

participation network involving various actors should be put in place to facilitate the communication among them.

These arguments are based on data drawn from first- and second-hand sources, field observations, and in-depth interviews. A total of 63 fieldwork sites (e.g., ethnic community organizations) were observed, and qualitative interviews were conducted with 18 Chinese migrant workers and 47 support staff members either during or after observation. In the next section, we examine the changing demographics of Chinese migrant workers in the UK and address barriers they face to accessing support for integrating into British society.

2. OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES TO SUPPORTING CHINESE MIGRANTS IN THE UK

In the welfare state system, the national government is often seen as the main support provider for those in need (including migrants), and non-governmental organizations (including ethnic communities) merely as service deliverers or agents acting on behalf of the government. From the oil crisis in the 1970s to the 2008 economic recession, the welfare state system has transformed from a state-full-supply model to a multi-pluralistic model which encourages multi-participation by governmental and non-governmental agencies in offering social support.

Take, for example, The Monitoring Group (TMG) in the UK, a leading anti-racist charity which promotes good race relations through education and raises awareness of the needs of those who are distressed or suffer violence or harassment. TMG's *Min Quan* project, in particular, works with Chinese victims of racial harassment across the country. Named after the Chinese word for "civil rights," this project operates a 24-hour victim support helpline in both Mandarin and Cantonese and provides casework support service to victims. Started in 1999, this project focuses on Chinese communities in London, Southampton, and Manchester and offers several drop-in legal advice centers (e.g., in Nottingham) for Chinese migrant workers. Overall, however, there is little social support for Chinese migrant workers, except for refugees, women, and house-bound clients. A lack of resources is the main problem.

The disunity and lack of internal coherence among Chinese communities exacerbates the insufficiency of resources. One interviewee suggests that there is no communication, or only "blocked" communication, among peer Chinese community organizations because of competition, jealousy, mistrust, and rumors. (Original grammatical errors are left so as not to alter the intended meanings.)

I think the reason that Chinese community is vulnerable among ethnic communities in the UK is basically caused by Chinese community itself as it is not united. Some of the charity Chinese organizations are competing, saying bad words to each other rather than building up a cooperative communication channel towards the benefits of the whole Chinese overseas community.

This problem was noted repeatedly during the observation and qualitative interviews. For example, one local Chinese community group organized a charity event promoting Chinese culture and helping local children with disabilities. Although quite a few local charities were involved, no other Chinese community organizations partnered in the event. Such individualist, non-cooperative relationships make it difficult for Chinese community organizations to act collectively to amass resources and serve the interests and benefits of Chinese migrants in the UK.

While old schisms continue to split the Chinese community, recent waves of migrant workers from mainland China have created a new divide. New and recent migrant workers hail from different regions and have different motivations for migration than the relatively more settled Cantonese-speaking communities. Most new migrant workers observed and interviewed in this project immigrated to the UK less than 10 years ago, mostly for economic reasons. The interviewees, for example, include a former office worker, self-employed businessman, and nurse who work in the UK as *da za* (cleaning and food preparation), *lou mian* (waiter or waitress), and *chao guo* (cook).

One interviewee, Qiu, shared her observations of the immigration tradition of one migrant group from Fuqing, a famous *qiaoxiang* (hometown of international migrants) in the Fujian province. This group of migrants works extremely hard in Britain for low pay. However, even this level of pay is enough for them to build huge luxury houses in their hometown in China. Generation by generation, this region has developed an immigration tradition. A young person who reaches around 20 years old is expected to go abroad, whether legally or illegally. Otherwise, he will be discriminated against by his *Tong Xiang* (fellow townspeople) as *mei ben shi* (of no ability).

New migrant groups do not necessarily get along with each other. For example, recent Fuqing migrant workers and Malaysian Chinese migrants experience communication barriers. One interviewee shared the following experience.

My former Malaysian chief chef was really nasty, he spoke bad words on me to others, and he spoke in Cantonese, and thought I won't understand them but my Fuqing friend told me that he told other kitchen staff I did not know how to work and I am stupid, something like that. I thought he was really bad, and lots of my friends quit their jobs after trying working there for one week, as he treated others really bad.

Beyond communication problems between Malaysian Chinese and those arriving from mainland China, infighting also occurs within the mainland Chinese community between the Dongbei and Fuqing migrant groups .

Social isolation is prevalent across all groups but perhaps experienced more intensely by new migrants. The lack of good terms among the various Chinese communities worsens the problem because it is difficult for them to collectively mobilize to support each other.

3. DIRECTIONS TO IMPROVE THE CURRENT SITUATION

While a panacea to cure the entire problem is unlikely, a gradual approach to minimize the communication gaps and poor relationships between various actors should be undertaken. An open and interactive network is called for to engage British government agencies, students, and scholars; Chinese governmental representatives, ethnic entrepreneurs, and community groups; civil society organizations; and trade unions in fostering the communication and mutual learning process.

This proposal is necessary because the traditional, top-down, linear support paradigm has neglected the internal complexity of ethnic communities and underestimated the potential of ethnic migrant communities' to help improve migrant workers' integration into the UK. The dominant model that stresses the leading roles of civil society and third-sector participation is not working. Most non-governmental actors cannot offer migrant workers institutional support, such as legal status and statutory rights. To break down these barriers, a multi-participation network combining the efforts of government, non-governmental, and ethnic community organizations should be integrated into the social support system, instead of delegating the task to any specific sector lacking good communication with other sectors.

In this approach, ethnic migrant communities can play an important role because they possess the necessary linguistic capacity and knowledge of Chinese migrant workers' actual conditions. Ethnic migrant communities can mediate the communication among all actors and facilitate the building of trust. Government agencies and civil society should also recognize community organizations' role and offer financial support for their operations.

Take, for example, the local Chinese school. It needs not only to maintain its traditional function as a language training provider but also to provide social support for Chinese students whose parents who are migrant workers. Chinese Saturday school sees a large number of children whose Chinese migrant worker parents (approximately two-thirds of parents in this 2012 investigation) bring them to Mandarin language training every Saturday. These Chinese migrant workers are eager to make full use of their time while their children are in language class. Their primary interests include tax law and regulations, citizens' rights, neighborhood safety, and accessing and using the National Health Service and local education system.

Finally, it is proposed that representatives from both the host country and the migrant-sending country should be involved in the multi-participation network. This participation will help the British actors more clearly understand the motivations and conditions of Chinese migrant workers and develop realistic mechanisms that can better tackle current challenges.

For example, a national campaign organized by Citizens UK in May 2009 claimed to be "a leading voice of civil society" and to represent the interests of ordinary people, especially "the

poorer and more vulnerable in society.”⁶ This campaign called for all migrant workers, no matter what their status and ethnicity, to demonstrate in London on May 4 to demand equal treatment from the host society. Despite the good intentions of this campaign, one interviewee argues that it could not solve the problem because it did not fully grasp the motivations and conditions of Chinese migrant workers in the UK.

Take the “strangers into citizens” as an example, the other Chinese business owners might think this event is good to help them to get cheaper labors and reduce their business cost. However, I disagree with them, and I do not think the conditional working permit for illegal workers will be an effective solution to them. I knew some Fuqingnese (a north group of Fujianese) travelled a very bitter way to come to work here. They would rather work hardest to wash dishes in kitchen for 10 years in the UK than try to learn English and communicate with local people and be socially reintegrated.

In her view, the best solution is for both the sending and the receiving governments to educate migrant workers and to provide work or job-related skills training, rather than to simply upgrade their “legal status” from “strangers” into “citizens.”

Although China and Britain government try to stop these illegal migrants coming every year, Fuqingnese still come one by one as they have few education at home, and they had a emigration tradition. It is not uncommon to hear Fuqingnese teenagers say: I do not need to go to school to study. When I grow up, I will go abroad to be an overseas illegal worker (...) We, south Fujian people have tradition to emigrate to Singapore, Malaysia and southeast Asia to do business, while they, Fuqingnese have an emigration tradition as well. I think if one wants to help these Fuqingnese to get legal status in Britain, by letting them get legal status through offering working permit, it will give the Fuqingnese who are still at home in China stronger desire to come illegally.

4. CONCLUSIONS

From a policy-making perspective, the multi-participation framework can allow the British government to understand the actual needs and conditions of migrant workers and consequently craft more realistic policies to manage them. In addition, the framework can help Chinese migrant workers be understood and obtain adequate support. Not only is the model appropriate for Chinese migrants; it can also be applied to improve the conditions of other UK migrant communities.

Take, for example, the Bangladeshi community, another non-European ethnic community. Similar to Chinese migrants, the Bangladeshi in the UK primarily are economic migrants.

⁶ Citizens UK, <http://www.citizensuk.org/>.

Mosques largely run Bangladeshi community services, but due to internal tensions and competition between religious groups, the vulnerable group of unemployed workers falls into a service provision gap. This problem is exacerbated by the barriers between the host society and the Bangladeshi community, mainly caused by governmental anti-terrorism policies.

Although the migrant Chinese communities do not face unique challenges and the severity of their plight should not be exaggerated, these shared experiences across different ethnic migrant groups suggest poor institutional communication flows among ethnic groups, governmental agencies, and civil society. It is hoped that this reflection article can serve as a starting point, offering guidelines to improve understanding of ethnic migrant workers' actual conditions and to encourage ethnic community organizations to take up the role of offering social support to their vulnerable migrant workers in the UK.

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